

# CCENDU Drug Alert

## Illicit Fentanyl

CCENDU Drug Alerts use rapidly assembled evidence, ranging from scientific literature to qualitative reports from those directly serving local, high-risk populations, to provide timely information on drug-related topics or patterns of immediate concern that have the potential for serious health-related consequences.

### Summary Information

- Recently, reports from Canada and the United States indicate that illicit fentanyl (i.e., produced in clandestine laboratories), rather than diverted prescription-grade fentanyl, has been appearing for sale on the streets.
- In some jurisdictions illicit fentanyl has been appearing in pill and powder form and has been sold as Oxycontin®, heroin or other substances.
- Fentanyl analogues made in clandestine laboratories can be significantly more toxic than pharmaceutical-grade fentanyl.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, individuals who are using heroin, Oxycontin or other substances, but mistakenly take fentanyl, are at greater risk of an accidental overdose.
- Fentanyl overdoses are harder to reverse than other opioids and might require significantly higher dosages of naloxone.<sup>2</sup>
- Illicit fentanyl was first brought to the attention of CCENDU members in May 2013 when the presence of fentanyl analogues was reported in Montreal, Quebec. Illicit fentanyl has since appeared in a number of other Canadian communities and the availability of this drug might continue to spread.
- Care must be taken when advising substance using populations about the dangers of illicit fentanyl:
  - Advisories should avoid terms that might, indirectly, attract users, such as “potent,” “strong” or “more powerful.” Such terms could inadvertently result in an increase in people seeking out the drug. Better alternatives are “more toxic,” “lethal,” “deadly” and “more concentrated” – terms that imply harm.
  - Include specific calls to action: calling 911, if an overdose is suspected; if using, not using alone and use slowly.
  - Consider mentioning some of the signs and symptoms of an overdose, so people know what to look out for. The Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program has a [poster](#) designed to clearly communicate these signs.<sup>3</sup>



- Date flyers and advisories so that people know this is a recent concern, not an ongoing issue.

## What Is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is an opioid that is prescribed as a prescription drug to treat chronic pain; however non-medical use has been observed. Prescription-grade fentanyl is available as a transdermal patch, injectable citrate and transmucosal lozenge.

## Reports from CCENDU Partners

The following table summarizes the situation across Canada regarding the presence of illicit fentanyl in local communities as reported by the eight CCENDU members.

City	Reports of illicit fentanyl	Local situation
Vancouver, BC	Yes	Vancouver Police encountered a powder and pills that tested positive for fentanyl. The RCMP in Kelowna and Prince George are also aware of it in their local community. The Provincial Public Health Officer of BC issued an information bulletin to emergency services. Public health warned service providers of its presence in the province (see Table 2 below).
Saskatoon, SK	Yes	Local addiction counsellors are reporting the presence of illicit fentanyl among clients seeking methadone treatment. Clients are self-reporting the use of street fentanyl or fake oxy 80's (i.e., Oxycontin pills made with fentanyl) at intake. Drug testing has also confirmed the presence of fentanyl among these clients.
Prince Albert, SK	No	No reports of illicit fentanyl.
Winnipeg, MB	No	No reports of illicit fentanyl.
Toronto, ON	No	No reports of illicit fentanyl.
Ottawa, ON	Yes	One (non-fatal) overdose when a female ingested an illicitly made pill that contained fentanyl.
Halifax, NS	No	No reports of illicit fentanyl.
St John's, NL	Unclear	Two instances in Goose Bay, Labrador, when illicitly produced fentanyl was sold as opioids such as heroin or Oxycontin.

## Recent Advisories

The following table lists examples of warnings, alerts, advisories issued by national, provincial or municipal authorities.

Location	Date	Issuing Authority	Summary
Montreal, QC	May 13, 2013	Montreal police	Police discuss and describe extremely powerful drug (desmethy fentanyl) seized in Montreal.
Prince George, BC	May 17, 2013	RCMP	RCMP public health warning regarding fentanyl being sold as heroin.
British Columbia	May 30, 2013	Office of the Provincial Health Officer	BC Provincial Health Officer urges health workers to be watchful for potential overdoses associated with fentanyl. <sup>2</sup>
Kelowna, BC	June 07, 2013	RCMP	RCMP provides overview of fentanyl and its associated dangers and warns of its recent appearance in many local street drugs.
Waterloo and Peterborough, ON	June 12, 2013	Peterborough Lakefield Community Police	Community advisory of the presence of fentanyl analogues (in oxycodone, heroin and other substances) and the risk of overdose.
United States	June 20, 2013	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)	CDC recommends laboratory testing of acetyl fentanyl and patient evaluation and treatment for overdose with synthetic opioids.



CCENDU will continue to monitor the presence of illicit fentanyl across Canada. If you have any questions, comments, information to contribute, or corrections to the information contained in this alert, please contact [CCENDU@ccsa.ca](mailto:CCENDU@ccsa.ca). For more information on CCENDU and to review previous CCENDU Drug Alerts and Bulletins please visit [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca).

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<sup>1</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). Page last updated, Wednesday, 14 September 2011. Drug Profiles: Fentanyl. Retrieved July 19, 2013, from <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/drug-profiles/fentanyl#physical>.

<sup>2</sup> Neufeld, L. May 30, 2013. Information Bulletin: Health Workers urged to watch for suspicious overdoses. Retrieved July 19, 2013, from [http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/pho/media/pdf/IB\\_fentanyl\\_May%2029.pdf](http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/pho/media/pdf/IB_fentanyl_May%2029.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> The Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program. Opioid Overdose Signs and Symptoms retrieved from <http://www.ohrdp.ca/wp-content/uploads/pdf/SignsSymptoms.pdf>.

**Prepared by the CCSA in partnership with the  
Canadian Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (CCENDU)**

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The Canadian Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (CCENDU) is a nation-wide network of community level partners who share information about local trends and emerging issues in substance use and exchange knowledge and tools to support more effective data collection.

**Disclaimer:** While every effort has been made to identify and compile the best and most reliable information available on the topic, the nature of the alert is such that CCSA cannot confirm the validity of all information included or acquired from links provided. While we have done our utmost to provide correct information, CCSA makes no representations or warranties of any kind, express or implied, about the completeness, accuracy or reliability with respect to the information included in this alert or the information included in the links provided.

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ISBN 978-1-77178-081-0

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